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SUBJECT: BENIN: OPPOSITION TAKES FIRM STAND AGAINST
PRESIDENT YAYI

REF: COTONOU 622

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: In an attempt to defuse the political crisis, President Yayi met individually with leaders of the opposition groups G4, G13 and Key Force in November 2008, and proposed a November 27-28 joint meeting with them. Also, on November 18, the GOB issued a decree to allow the full application of the 2002 Opposition Act, which grants special privileges to opposition political parties. They rejected the two-day meeting proposal on the grounds that they had not been consulted beforehand and that the dates conflicted with their own meeting. On November 28 and 29, opposition parties met in Bohicon in central Benin. During the meeting they vehemently criticized President Yayi's policy and re-affirmed their opposition to him. It appeared that the opposition group will endorse a sole candidate to face President Yayi in the 2011 presidential election, Adrien Houngbedji, the President of the Social Democratic Party (PRD), a component of the G4. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Following his November 18 decision to hold a political conference with the opposition, President Yayi met opposition parties leaders forming the G4 namely Nicephore Soglo, Honorary President of the Renaissance du Benin (RB), Sefou Fagbohoun, president of the African Movement for Democracy and Progress (MADEP), Bruno Amoussou, President of the Social-Democracy Party (PSD), and Adrien Houngbedji, President of the Party of Democratic Renewal (PRD). He also held talks with Nassirou Bako, the Spokesman of the G13 and representatives of the Force Key party. Opposition leaders hailed President Yayi for this initiative and expressed concern that President Yayi should allow them more time for better coordination and preparation of the conference. They also argued that the proposed schedule for the conference coincided with their own political meeting. It is notable that the meetings received partial media coverage, and Post learned from reliable sources that they were heated discussions off record.

¶3. (U) In the midst of this flurry of political activity, on November 20, the Council of Ministers issued an enabling decree which will permit the application of Opposition Act 2001 of October 14, 2002. The Opposition Act was introduced and adopted in 2002 by former president Kerekou. The Act has not been implemented to date by political parties, because it lacked an enabling decree for the implementation of Article 12 of the Act dealing with the protocol and other benefits that should be granted to declared opposition leaders. To correct this, decree No 2008-649 of November 2008 defines protocol benefits for declared opposition leaders, including participation in the signature of national and international agreements, invitation to official events, assistance by Beninese diplomatic missions when abroad, right to be consulted by the President of the Republic on issues of general interest. As part of other material benefits, opposition leaders are entitled to a car, a driver, a bodyguard, a Special Advisor and a personal Secretary. The

initial Opposition Act No 2001-36 of October 14, 2002 sets a legal framework for the political opposition by defining the criteria for the registration of the opposition, the role, the rights and the obligations of the opposition.

¶4. (SBU) On November 25, talks between Nicephore Soglo and President Yayi were reportedly friendly because prior to the meeting, on November 20 the government and the municipality of Cotonou had put in place a concerted framework for resolving conflicts opposing the central government and the mayor of Cotonou over the issue of financial autonomy. On November 24, former President Kerekou played the role of mediator when he accompanied G13 representatives to visit President Yayi. Discussions between President Yayi and G13 representatives were reportedly tense due to the overly radical requirements of this opposition group of 13 National Assembly's deputies. Many critics have linked President Kerekou's involvement in these discussions to his controversial affinity with Issa Saley, the leader of the G13 and a businessman whose business prospered during Kerekou's era.

¶5. (U) On November 28 and 29, leaders of the G4, G13, Key Force and allied movements during a political meeting in Bohicon, central Benin, voiced vitriolic statements against president Yayi's governance. Each leader took the floor and vigorously criticized President Yayi's policies. Bruno Amoussou, the Spokesman for the G4 and leader of PSD in his opening remarks said that the root cause of the current difficulties lay in the political practice of the "government of change", in its political philosophy and in its style of governance. Nicephore Soglo, the RB's Honorary President and Mayor of Cotonou pledged the unity of opposition parties. Lazare Sehoueto, the leader of Key Force told the audience that the only promising prospect of the opposition ahead of the 2011 presidential

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election was "to change the car and the driver". This last statement epitomized the opposition's ultimate goal to alternate power in the 2011 presidential election.

¶6. (U) During the Bohicon meeting, Adrien Houngbedji, the president of the PRD, a bonifree opposition leader, described the decree No 2008-649 of November 2002 as "an empty shell", because it failed to address the crucial issues of security and equal access of the opposition to the media. It is noteworthy that the very Opposition Act No 2001-36 had already covered the security and equal access to media issues so that the enabling decree no longer need to address them. The issuance of the decree did not generate the expected enthusiasm among political leaders that had linked the absence of a declared opposition to the lack of an enabling decree to make it fully applicable. Logically, Adrien Houngbedji appears to be the only political leader that qualifies to be the opposition leader under the Opposition Act, since PRD secured in the March 2007 legislative election 10 seats of the 83, exceeding the 10% of the vote as required by the Act. Notably, leaders of parties with at least 9 deputies at the National Assembly can register as opposition leaders. No other parties have met this threshold requirement, unless minor parties at the National Assembly group together to form 9-member parliamentary groups.

¶7. (SBU) Credible sources confirmed to Post that the G4, G13 and Force Key seek to present PRD's Adrien Houngbedji as President Yayi's challenger in the 2011 presidential election. NOTE: In the March 2006 presidential poll, Houngbedji was backed by over six political parties and thirty various movements and associations. In the first round he obtained 24% of the vote and finished second. The results of the run off showed Adrien Houngbedji with 25.5% of the final tally END NOTE.

¶8. (U) The published report of the opposition's meeting provided a somber picture of the economic, financial, social and institutional situations confronting the country. As part of the recommendations, the participants in the meeting urged the opposition coalition to pool efforts towards national unity and peace, to hone strategies for attaining power change in 2011. Participants also invited other political forces to join them in the fight ahead of the 2011 presidential elections. Many observers believe that the Bohicon's meeting, instead of fostering political dialogue and easing the

political tension, was a real trial of President Yayi's government.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The electoral campaign for president in 2011 has begun with the opposition's declared commitment to defeat President Yayi. It is now uncertain that the G4, G13 and Key Force will enter Yayi's government. This situation will continue to hamper the smooth functioning of the National Assembly. If the opposition group, with its current configuration, continues to stick together to propel Houngbedji ahead of the 2011 presidential election, this will augur ill for President Yayi. On the other hand, precocious electoral campaigns by President Yayi will distract him from the efficient implementation of his agenda. Since Benin's political landscape is characterized by individual and opportunistic interests, intrigues, regionalism and the politicians' readiness to jump ship, no one can predict today what will happen in 2011. END COMMENT

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